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# Local officials must be held accountable for higher taxes

**HIGHLIGHTS** .....

In Texas, property taxes cannot increase unless elected body decides

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Officials know property values, projected tax revenue before setting tax rate

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If adopted tax rate brings higher tax bill, it's a tax increase

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BY RON WRIGHT

*Special to the Star-Telegram*

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To say that Texans are alarmed by ever-rising property taxes would be a grand understatement. I know.

As Tarrant County tax assessor-collector, I hear from them all the time.

As frustrated as taxpayers are with property taxes, they are more frustrated with not knowing who is responsible for the increases.

Misunderstandings abound.

Restoring clarity and accountability to the process, I believe, is crucial.

Lately, when I speak to groups, I pose two questions:

First, how many of you believe that if property values go up, property taxes also go up automatically?

And second, how many of you believe that nobody is accountable for the increase in taxes?

Usually, most people in the group raise a hand in response to the first question, but everybody raises a hand in response to the second.

This should be disturbing to every elected official in Texas. In politics, perception is reality.

The growing perception that nobody is accountable for tax increases undermines the legitimacy of the entire property tax system.

The system is designed so that local elected bodies decide how much property taxes you pay.

It is set up so that the elected officials — not the unelected administrators of an appraisal district — make that determination.

And that is exactly how it works.

Unfortunately, the ink was barely dry on the 1979 Texas law that created central appraisal districts when local governments began convincing taxpayers that value, not tax rates, was the problem.

Today, almost everybody believes that higher property values raise taxes.

It is and has always been a myth.

Local elected officials are good people who want to do the right thing for their constituents, but many of them have also fallen victim to the myth.

Incredibly, some believe that if they approve a tax rate that is the same as the year before and values go up, they haven't really voted to increase taxes!

There is nothing automatic about rising property taxes.

Local elected bodies have always had the power to lower their tax rates and slow the growth of government.

Too many too often chose to spend the windfall that comes from higher values.

Only rarely have they shared that windfall with taxpayers in any meaningful way.

These truths about property tax are worth remembering:

In Texas, property taxes cannot increase unless action is taken by an elected body.

Values and projected tax revenue are known *before* the local elected body adopts the tax rate.

No matter if the rate goes up, down, or stays the same as the year before, if the adoption of the tax rate results in a higher tax bill, it's a tax increase.

Appraisal districts, tax offices and local elected bodies should work together to provide as much honesty and transparency in the property tax system as possible.

Blaming value alone for higher taxes should stop.

Property owners should also do their part.

Learn more about the taxes you have to pay, and engage your elected officials.

Many taxpayers protest their appraisals in hopes of getting their property values lowered.

Still, protesting appraisals is not the end, but the beginning of the fight to lower your taxes.

The end occurs when local elected bodies adopt their tax rates later this year.

*Ron Wright is the Tarrant County tax assessor-collector.*



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